

SETTLER COLONIAL BELONGING AND INDIGENOUS ERASURE IN *THE SNOW*  
*CHILD* AND *THE RAVEN'S GIFT*

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## Abstract

This research examines two contemporary Alaskan works of literature: Eowyn Ivey's *The Snow Child* and Don Rearden's *The Raven's Gift*. I have engaged with (post) colonial theoretical frameworks to describe the settler colonial dynamics at work in each text. By comparing these two works I find that each narrative seeks autochthonous belonging for settler colonial protagonists, which is predicated upon the elimination of indigeneity from the land. I focus on the divergent rhetorical methods of indigenous erasure in each text, and the interaction between race and gender in settler colonial identity construction. Examining the relationship between race and gender highlights the underappreciated significance of the complicity of white women in the settler colonial process and demonstrates the crucial role that indigenous women play as gatekeepers to settler colonial belonging. Within the narratives, I find examples of the formation of private property under settler colonial thought, which paved the way for the dismissal of indigenous land claims. I also look at the way that each text employs the metaphorical language of ghostliness and the supernatural to weaken indigenous presence and bring indigeneity to the precipice of extinction. Both narratives ultimately avoid active dispossession in the settler colonial quest for land by creating a landscape in which indigeneity is already gone.



## Dedication

To Alexander, Celah, Jacob, Qianna, and Sibylline





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## Introduction

I have chosen to examine two contemporary works of literature: Eowyn Ivey's *The Snow Child* (2012), and Don Rearden's *The Raven's Gift* (2013). Each novel was well received on the national level while also being notable within Alaska. I selected two writers who are situated in Alaska, so the narratives reflect cultural artifacts that are less affected by the national imagination of the Last Frontier. I wanted to understand their latent themes of (post) coloniality, and although neither *The Snow Child* nor *The Raven's Gift* has garnered scholarly attention, I found that (post)-colonial critiques of early American novels, Australian, and New Zealand literature have illuminated certain patterns that appear in each text.

Both works share a few important commonalities. Each novel is authored by Alaskans and has resonated deeply with an Alaskan audience. Each outlines the journey of a settler coming to Alaska from the continental United States and creating a home here; each narrative is experienced from the settlers' point of view. The novels create twin origin stories for their settler protagonists; and in both cases, these stories are predicated upon indigenous absence from the land, itself the very foundation for settler belonging. The novels include elements of supernatural ghosts, spectres, and cannibals. Adoption of indigeneity to further structure settler identity is another theme occurring in both narratives. However, the most interesting thematic intersection between the two works is the central, albeit passive, role each gives to a young indigenous woman through whom the settler gains access to belonging.

In *The Snow Child* the settlers that come to Alaska do so in the 1920s following the federal Homesteading Act. Jack and Mabel are a married couple that feel exiled from their home in the eastern United States after the stillbirth of their one and only child. After relocating to Alaska, the pair find the territory does not meet their hopes and expectations for bounty and new

beginnings; the land is hostile to them. The novel follows their journey from mere survival to a flourishing farm. The land around them is empty of indigeneity except for the spectre of a child, who comes to represent the absent Alaska Natives for the audience, and through whom they develop kinship in ways that can legitimize their belonging to the land.

*The Raven's Gift* is set ambiguously in either the near future or present day and follows the journey of a schoolteacher who comes to Alaska because of the possibility of his own Alaska Native ancestry. Like Jack and Mabel, John feels exiled from the urban sprawl of the continental United States and comes to Alaska seeking belonging and a sense of home. His journey involves surviving the outbreak of a mysterious disease that decimates the Alaska Native population. John and his companion, a young Yup'ik woman, survive only by reverting to primitivity.

*The Snow Child* portrays an empty and hostile land. The Alaska Natives that would be there are only peripherally existent. The child, representative of the absent indigeneity, is a ghost throughout most of the narrative until she emerges into the full blooded physical world briefly late in the novel, before her fated disappearance. Throughout the narrative she initially does not have a name, eventually comes to speak in a whisper, and is referred to as an "apparition", a "spirit," and a "sprite" (Ivey 212, 219, 236). Jack and Mabel grapple with what they initially perceive as cabin fever because of the supernatural elements invoked through magical realism. In *The Raven's Gift* the Alaska Native peoples affected by the mysterious disease transform into supernatural cannibals. The Yup'ik woman with whom John travels is also privy to supernatural dreams and visions. The theme of haunting exists in both novels, and it is indigeneity that is made to be supernatural or ghostlike.

Both narratives portray an adoption of indigeneity into the settler colonial social structure which furthers assimilation. In *The Snow Child* Faina becomes a daughter to Jack and Mabel.

She births a son before she dies that is raised by her adoptive family. The kinship created between her and the old couple allows Faina to become a substitute indigenous ancestor for the settler colonial characters, which vicariously grants them an autochthonous origin. Alaskan Native people in *The Raven's Gift* are almost completely killed by disease. The only surviving indigenous characters are a small band of orphaned children and Rayna. John comes to be seen by the audience as indigenous through Rayna, and by the end of the narrative he is the *de facto* father for these Alaska Native children. The adoption of indigeneity in both of these novels strengthens, via familial connection, autochthonous belonging for settler colonials.

The most striking similarity between the narratives lies with the two feminine representations of indigeneity. Neither woman is the protagonist of the story; both play supporting roles to the settlers experience. Both women — Faina, in *The Snow Child*, and Rayna, in *The Raven's Gift* — are not named initially. Faina eventually whispers her name one third of the way into the narrative, and Rayna is finally given a name halfway through. This choice to keep these characters nameless, and in Faina's case, also voiceless, makes their presence in the novel less substantial. Both female characters are also on the brink of womanhood and become romantic partners for settlers in the narrative. The most uncanny similarity between these two women is that in the final chapter of each novel they both disappear naked into a snowstorm. Faina never returns, and when John finds Rayna, they become romantic partners and the novel ends. It is through these two young women that the settlers ultimately gain access to belonging. Jack and Mabel establish kinship to Faina that gives them an authentic connection to the land, and John is recognized by Rayna, such that he is able to become indigenous.

The two narratives depart from one another through the modes of indigenous erasure and subsequent settler colonial belonging by which the settler fantasy is enacted. I argue that, in *The*

*Snow Child*, through the process of white autochthony the mantle of belonging is passed from ancient indigene to settler when kinship is established with Faina after which she inevitably disappears. Rayna's recognition of John as indigenous in *The Raven's Gift* allows him to replace the indigeneity that has been wiped out by the mysterious disease. Although both settler fantasies gain access to belonging through a young indigenous woman; *The Snow Child* forgets and erases indigeneity whereas in *The Raven's Gift* the settler fantasy is achieved by erasing and then replacing indigeneity when the settler becomes indigenous himself.

Both of these novels project settler colonial fantasies of belonging. Belonging for subjects of settler colonialism is a key structure of identity and for whom narrative explanations justifying colonial rule are appealing. For Patrick Wolfe, settler colonialism can be understood as a structure of elimination, rather than an event, because it is a continuing process that requires complex ideological mechanisms of legitimation. In "Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native" he foregrounds land as the crucial epicenter for indigenous elimination: "So far as Indigenous people are concerned, where they are is who they are ... the primary motive for elimination is not race (or religion, ethnicity, grade of civilization, etc.) but access to territory. Territoriality is settler colonialism's specific, irreducible element" (388). The settler fantasy enacted in both novels creates *terra nullius*; the land belongs to no one and therefore colonial dispossession is avoided. Wolfe argues that "elimination refers to more than the summary liquidation of Indigenous people, though it includes that. In its positive aspect, the logic of elimination marks a return whereby the native repressed continues to structure settler-colonial society" (390). Indigeneity is drawn into settler identity in a manner authenticating colonial presence.

Maya Mikdashi, in her essay, “What is Settler Colonialism?,” refrains from offering a strict definition, but she nonetheless confirms what Wolfe argues regarding settler colonialism’s ongoing process of erasure:

There will be no great theoretical claim or strong intervention. There are no answers to the question of settler colonialism. Or at least, the answers are deceptively simple. There are no definitions, only descriptions: ... Settler colonialism is an inherited silence where you know memories are supposed to be ... It is seeking epiphany through writing and finding only the proliferation of questions, of doubts, and of buried histories. Like these questions, and more than anything, settler colonialism is ongoing. (31-2)

*The Snow Child* and *The Raven’s Gift* both reflect this “inherited silence where ... memories are supposed to be.” The silence in both novels fills the space in which indigenous survival into modernity could exist. *The Snow Child* and *The Raven’s Gift* embody the tension between indigenous erasure and indigenous assimilation, and each inevitably resolves itself in settler belonging.

In neither story can modernity and indigeneity coexist. These authors invoke Alaska’s version of the “(Indian) problem” by bringing indigeneity and settlers together on an imaginative precipice of imminent change. Both *The Snow Child* and *The Raven’s Gift* make no secret of the inevitable disappearance of indigeneity within the context of the novel. *The Snow Child* foregrounds disappearance by introducing the inevitable plot outline preceding each section of the novel. The audience only wonders when and how the elimination will occur, not *if* it will happen. Likewise, *The Raven’s Gift* opens on a scene of apocalyptic destruction, and the audience must know that the Alaska Native peoples introduced through flashbacks later in the



narrative will not survive. Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang describe the modern “(Indian) problem” in their article “Decolonization is Not a Metaphor”:

...Indigeneity prompts multiple forms of settler anxiety, even if only because the presence of Indigenous peoples -- who make *a priori* claims to land and ways of being -- is a constant reminder that the settler colonial project is incomplete ...

The desire to reconcile is just as relentless as the desire to disappear the Native; it is a desire to not have to deal with this (Indian) problem anymore. (10)

The work of these contemporary settler fantasies is to neutralize feelings of complicity in colonial violence. These fantasies subtly move Alaska’s collective history toward innocence and belonging. Each author walks the space between an Indian past and a settler future; their stories inevitably resolve themselves in settler autochthony. Autochthony is the inherent connection between indigenous peoples and their land, but the settler comes to a place without origin and must access this connection through indigenous elimination “whereby the native repressed continues to structure settler-colonial society” (Wolfe 390).

Contemporary Alaskans often forget the long and complicated arc of their recent colonial past. Kate Shipley Coddington describes the state as a “kind of knotting or congealing of power” in her article “Spectral Geographies: Haunting and Everyday State Practices in Colonial and Present-Day Alaska” (749). *The Snow Child* and *The Raven’s Gift* both posit conflicting messages of indigenous erasure, assimilation, and reconciliation as having already occurred. They build a firm foundation for settler belonging that forgets the recent and still present struggle for indigenous sovereignty.

In part, the supernatural elements of both texts demonstrate an uneasy repression of Alaska’s recent colonial history. Coddington introduces the useful framework of “spectral

geographies” as “envisioning how material geographies of present-day Alaskan life are transformed through their encounters with the past” (752). Further, Coddington argues:

The ability to see these initially unrelated instances as elements of a larger framework is what I refer to as a spectral geography. It is as if each element haunted by the ghost of the colonial state becomes tinged with a particular color, visible, and clearly highlighted only once one gazes through a particular lens. Haunting is that lens, that analytic. What it reveals are the connections: together, this particular spectral geography reveals how ghosts reinvigorate aspects of the colonial state and manifest themselves in the everyday spaces of the present day ...Haunting traces of colonial state practices, recognizable yet hidden, mar the potential of the present with the seething presence of the past. (753)

Both novels are marred with “the seething presence of the past,” and I have worked to identify and describe the patterns and themes in each text.

I would like to make a closing note regarding terminology throughout the introduction and both chapters. I fluctuate between indigenous, Indian, Alaskan Native, Yup'ik, and Dena'ina. Partly this inconsistency stems from my interacting with theoretical frameworks that invoke their own terminologies. Where possible, when referring to specific peoples I use their tribal affiliation. However, broader terminology, like indigeneity, and moving between Indian and Alaskan Native, draws attention to similarities in the way that disparate groups have been affected by settler colonial processes.



## Chapter 1

### The New Local: Writing Indigenous Erasure

Wolverine River, circa 1920. Anchorage has just been founded with the railroad driving the economy in the newly purchased U.S. territory of Alaska. The river, which runs through the Matanuska Valley remains home to the least transitory of Alaska's indigenous population, the Dena'ina (Boraas 2). In 1898, the federal Homesteading Act, which gave one hundred and sixty acres of land to anyone willing to develop and continue to maintain land for five years, extended to the Alaskan territory. The promise of free land, the railroad, and plentiful resources attracted many settlers. This influx of white colonizers brought smallpox, wiping out approximately ninety percent of the Dena'ina population by 1915 (Eklutna). The historically diminished local native population could potentially explain their absence in Eowyn Ivey's *The Snow Child* (2012), which is set in 1920's Alaska. Ivey's Pulitzer Prize finalist and national bestselling debut novel resonated with readers, possibly because it reincarnates traditionally popular settler fantasies with a fresh sense of place, showing the audience that Ivey intimately knows the frontier.

Ivey's story centers around two characters, Jack and Mabel, who have travelled from "back East" to homestead in Alaska. After losing a child to stillbirth, the couple seeks silence, peace, and a sense of belonging. Jack and Mabel's journey is a story of outsiders becoming insiders, another possible explanation for the conspicuous absence of the indigenous population of Alaska in Ivey's story. Historically, the settler fantasy narrative rests upon the explicit erasure of the original inhabitants in order to create space for a new population to lay claim to the land. A settler fantasy must resolve itself in autochthony: traditionally thought of as a magical link between land and indigenous peoples. The settler protagonist gains access to this connection to the soil through the assimilation or erasure of indigenous peoples standing between the settler and a sense of authentic belonging.

Despite the setting and time period and amid the length of the novel, *The Snow Child* contains exactly four references to indigeneity. All of these are parenthetical references, and none includes Alaskan Native presence. Instead, the wilderness around Jack and Mabel's homestead is portrayed as empty. The vast mountains, trees, lakes, and rivers only contain one young, slight, and very pale, girl. Ivey uses magical realism to suggest that this girl, Faina, is born from the snow: "We wished for her, we made her in love and hope, and she came to us. She's our little girl, and I don't know how exactly, but she's made from this place, from this snow, from this cold" (219-20). Faina is endowed with an autochthonous connection to the land through her supernatural birth; a relationship to place that Jack and Mabel vicariously claim through the kinship they imagine into being with this girl. In this fantasy narrative, Jack and Mabel forget and then erase indigenous presence in order to strengthen settler colonial power structures and autochthonous belonging.

*The Snow Child* is ostensibly framed using the Russian fairy tale of Snegurochka. The book is broken into three sections, each preceded with a segment of the Russian fairy tale that foreshadows the plot. The Russian fairy tale always begins the same way, a childless old man and woman build a snow child which comes to life and becomes like a daughter to them. After this beginning, some form of rupture occurs between the child and old couple, and eventually the child melts. In the version used by Ivey, the child meets a boy and mortal love becomes her downfall (127-9). Alan Boraas has recorded a Dena'ina origin myth in *Dena'ina Prehistory* that also posits the indigenous population could have been born of snow:

The Sky Clan people, they say, stayed in the sky on a frozen cloud; and they drifted over this way to a little warmer place, and the frost melted away from under them, and they landed on top of Mount Susitna, they say. (9)

Both the Dena'ina origin myth and the child in the Russian fairy tale of Snegurochka have a magical power giving them an authentic avenue for belonging to a geographical space. This sense of belonging is something that Jack and Mabel cannot claim when they originally settle in Alaska in the beginning of their journey.

Jack and Mabel feel that the land is hostile to them. They are uncomfortable in their new home; Alaska has not lived up to their expectations of excessive bounty and new beginnings. In one scene Mabel sits alone in a shabby hotel room waiting for Jack to finish building their cabin, unable to write to her sister Ada because she does not want to admit to being wrong for wanting to move to Alaska: "She [Mabel] clutched the advertisements promising a new homeland ... She cooked and she cleaned, and found herself further consumed by the gray, until even her vision was muted and the world around her drained of color" (34-5). The silence she sought when Mabel moved to Alaska is also unattainable:

She had imagined that in Alaska wilderness silence would be peaceful, like snow falling at night, air filled with promise and no sound. But that was not what she found. Instead, when she swept the plank floor, the broom bristles scritch like some sharp-toothed shrew nibbling at her heart. When she washed the dishes, plates and bowls clattered as if they were breaking to pieces. (3)

Her imagination and advertisements led her to Alaska in search of something that she cannot find. She was driven from "back east" by the "sounds of her failure and regret" (3). She wanted to escape the sounds of family life and the relentless noise of children, reminding Mabel of her own inability to have children. The silence she describes here cannot be characterized by an emptiness because it is filled with hostility. Jack also faces disillusionment and a reality that does not adhere to his expectations:

When Jack told his brothers he was moving to Alaska, they envied him. God's country, they'd said. The land of milk and honey. Moose, caribou, and bears — game so thick you won't know what to shoot first. And the streams so full of salmon, you can walk across their backs to the other side. What a different truth he found. Alaska gave up nothing easily. It was lean and wild and indifferent to a man's struggle, and he had seen it in the eyes of that red fox. (61)

For Jack and Mabel surviving the dark winter is difficult. However, in a bright moment of childlike joy they create a snowman, adding details until it becomes the incarnation of their mutual longing. The night after their snow child is made, the real child, Faina, appears suddenly in their life; she is white as snow, with berry-tinted lips, straw-colored hair, and wears the red scarf and mittens made by Mabel's sister Ada. As Faina continues to wear them throughout the story, they serve to nurture the familial tie to Jack and Mabel. In *The Snow Child* manifestations arise within absence; the silence is filled with hostility, and Faina replaces missing indigeneity.

Robert George Garbutt in "White Autochthony," illuminates Faina's magical birth from snow: "Autochthony is a particular claim of authenticity emerging from a 'magical' relation between people and soil" (4-5). Faina belongs to the land in a way to which Jack and Mabel do not have access. However, when they build a familial connection to Faina, they empower their own right to settle in Alaska. Initially, Faina resists the authority of Jack and Mabel's parental desire. She leaves every summer and comes back with first snow, and the old couple must eventually be satisfied by her ability to flit in and out of their lives and recognize that she does not need their protection: "Didn't he want to hold her and call her their own? But this longing did not blind him. Like a rainbow trout in a stream, the girl sometimes flashed her true self to him. A wild thing glittering in dark water" (236). Faina maintains authority over her own body and the

ability to appear and disappear right up until adolescence. Like a “rainbow trout” she cannot be held; a rainbow trout belongs in water and Faina belongs in the wild. Jack and Mabel cannot possess Faina, and no one else in their small community has ever seen her. However, by the end of *The Snow Child* Faina has become like a daughter to Jack and Mabel and they are thriving. Legitimate space in Alaska has been created for them through their association with Faina.

The passage in which Faina transitions into a woman occurs near the end of the book and portrays a much different relationship from the one Faina and Jack have when she is a child:

It hadn’t happened instantly, the way he had always imagined, with a gush of blood and a piercing wail, but instead fatherhood had arrived quietly, gradually, over the course of years, and he had been blind to it. And now, just as he finally understood that a daughter had been flitting in and out of his life, he was being asked to let her go. (332)

Garrett, the youngest son of Jack and Mabel’s only friends in Alaska, has come to ask Jack for Faina’s hand in marriage after she becomes pregnant with his child. The concept of “letting go,” as seen in the passage above, suggests that now, unlike his previous inability, Jack has hold of her. He has gained the authority to give Faina away, which is absent between them when she is like a “rainbow trout.” Faina’s pregnancy out of wedlock is the rupture between the old couple and the child that begins her inevitable disappearance.

The slowly developing relationship between the old couple and Faina gives them the connection to place they cannot manage without her. Faina, through autochthony, comes to represent indigeneity, a state which has historically occupied a space of ambivalence in the American imagination. Philip J. Deloria writes in *Playing Indian* that



Indians represented instinct and freedom. They spoke for the ‘spirit of the continent.’ Whites desperately desired that spirit, yet they invariably failed to become aboriginal and thus ‘finished.’ Savage Indians served Americans as oppositional figures against whom one might imagine a civilized national Self. Coded as freedom, however, wild Indianness proved equally attractive, setting up a ‘have-the-cake-and-eat-it-too’ dialectic of simultaneous desire and repulsion. (3)

The binary between settler and other serves as a point to which settler colonials can build identity. Jack and Mabel have constructed Faina out of snow; she comes to represent the “simultaneous desire and repulsion” in their relationship with Alaska because they desperately desire children and belonging, yet they cannot conceive and face a hostile land. Jack and Mabel feel anxiety over their identity as homesteaders because they came lacking “a right to be there.” Deloria describes the tension between whiteness and Indianness in the creation of identity:

White faces meant something, as did Indian costumes, and if both faces and costumes carried meanings, they also canceled each other out. Positive and negative values assigned to interior or exterior Others (or both) clashed, giving the entire practice a characteristic ambivalence. [They] were both Indian and white, but they were also neither. (115)

Faina is white, but she dresses like an Indian, she acts like an Indian, and she is at home in the Alaskan wilderness as the missing Dena’ina would have been. Garbutt addresses this pressure between identities as “the tension in postcolonial settler identity: a tension that arises between ‘the backward-looking impotence of exile and the forward-looking impetus to indigeneity’” (6-7). Jack and Mabel feel exiled from their previous home, and Faina has arisen between the “impetus” of exile and indigeneity. The child born of snow is Jack and Mabel’s attempt “to

satisfy the ‘impossible necessity’ to become ‘native’” (6). The autochthonous birth of Faina through Jack and Mabel “eliminates the question: ‘to whom does, or did, this land belong? ... autochthony legitimises a claim to territory through boundaries dictated by nature and not through a social contract or the arbitrariness of a treaty” (3). Jack and Mabel eventually belong, not through arbitrary authority vested as homesteaders, but through kinship with Faina, whose claim is dictated by nature. Faina can exist, on her own through subsistence, unlike Jack and Mabel when they arrive:

What kind of home can you have out there?

I’ll show you.

... The next bright day, the child came for Mabel and led her away into the forest

... She followed the girl away from the homestead and along the trails Mabel alone never could have seen or known — snowshoe hare runs beneath willow boughs, wolf tracks along hard packed drifts ... [Mabel] stumbled in Jack’s wool pants and the snowshoes he had strapped to her feet; ahead of her Faina strode in grace, her feet light upon the snow. (244-5)

Eventually, Faina brings Mabel back to the homestead: “‘But wait — we can’t go back yet. You haven’t showed me your home.’ ‘It’s here. I’ve showed you.’” It is then that Mabel “knew the truth. The snowy hillsides, the open sky, the dark place in the trees where a wolverine gnawed on the leg of some small, dead animal — this was the child’s home” (247). Faina walks “in grace” over snow wearing a birchbark pack, while Mabel must wear snowshoes to traverse the same landscape. Faina’s actions are a prerequisite for authentic Indianness which, according to Deloria, can only exist “far outside the temporal bounds of modern society” (94). Deloria writes that it is not “Indian *people* (in the form of individuals) [but their] culture that made them really

Indian” (91). Faina’s lifestyle and autochthonous birth allow her to represent, as Deloria suggests, true indigeneity which surpasses “Indian *people*” and is claimed only through cultural practices.

Faina represents indigeneity in the audience’s imagination because the wilderness in *The Snow Child* is empty of Alaska Native peoples. There is no physical presence of indigeneity; Faina, a ghostly vestige, appears and vanishes without leaving marks. Renee L. Bergland discusses precedent for the removal of indigeneity to the imaginative space in *The National Uncanny: Indian Ghosts and American Subjects*:

By discursively emptying physical territory of Indians and by removing those Indians to white imaginative spaces, spectralization claims the physical landscape as American territory and simultaneously transforms the interior landscape into American territory ... The people who were described and imagined as ghosts were those whose existence challenged developing structures of political and economic power. (5 and 7)

Throughout the book Faina is presented as a possible symptom of cabin fever; “Maybe he and Mabel had truly lost their minds. Cabin Fever — wasn’t that what Esther called it?” (82). When the only trace of indigeneity is spectral, made even more vulnerable by Faina’s feminine and childlike stature, *terra nullius* is ripe for settler colonialism. Faina, representing indigeneity, could threaten developing colonial structures, but her ghostliness undermines her ability to do so.

Understanding Faina’s spectral presence contributes toward Jack and Mabel’s settler fantasy. Bergland discusses the ghosting of indigeneity as a common trope of American literature:

Many of America's most prominent authors seized on the figure of the spectral Native as central to their attempts to develop a uniquely American national literature: during the first half of the nineteenth century... The various meanings and structures of the discourse of spectralization are complicated and ambiguous ... A phenomenon that is clear and consistent: When European Americans speak of Native Americans, they always use the language of ghostliness. They call Indians demons, apparitions, shapes, specters, phantoms, or ghosts. They insist that Indians are able to appear and disappear suddenly and mysteriously, and also that they are ultimately doomed to vanish. (1)

Bergland's discussion of the discourse of spectralization is consistent with Ivey's treatment of Faina in *The Snow Child*. Throughout the narrative Faina mysteriously appears and disappears and is called many of the supernatural epithets listed in Bergland's description. Ivey's reincarnation of nineteenth century literary tropes is consistent with the westward procession of settler colonialism. Whereas Cooper and the like were responding to tension between manifest destiny and American Indians, Alaska's colonial history is much more recent. The Alaska State motto "North to the Future," chosen in 1967, is yet another iteration of western manifest destiny (State of Alaska).

Therefore, it is not surprising that the mysterious absence, ghosting, and inevitable disappearance of indigeneity in Alaska resonated with a modern Alaskan audience. This rhetorical technique also allows for the indigenization of Americans: "One result of the internalization of Indians is that the American individuals who 'contain' Indians thereby constitute themselves as representative Americans" (Bergland 4). When the ghost of indigeneity

comes to be a projection of the internal American imagination, settler colonial fantasies can use spectralization as a means for creating white indigenously autochthonous protagonists.

*The Snow Child* erases even the memory of indigenous people living off the land before White colonizers came to settle the region. Consider this conversation between Jack and Garrett:

‘There’s no way.’

‘What? Raising a fox from a pup?’

‘No. The girl. Living by herself around here, in the woods. In the middle of winter? She wouldn’t stand a chance.’

‘You don’t think a person could do it? Live off this land?’

‘Oh somebody could. A man. Somebody who really knew what he was doing. Not many,’ and he said it as if he were one of the few. (199)

In this conversation, the audience can see a mutual forgetting of the indigenous peoples that populated and successfully lived off the land despite their being *not* “a man” or at all like Garrett. The image Garrett paints here of the rugged individual, like himself, conquering or taming the land takes part in Garbutt’s idea of a “founding forgetting” which:

... is marked by the dispossession of indigenous peoples by settlers seeking legitimization through a ‘founding forgetting’ of that dispossession. In claiming autochthony the settlers naturalise themselves to place. They become unmarked: the natives born to the nation, the locals. This particular settler forms a cultural autochthony, I name white ‘autochthony’ because its unmarked nature has the unmarked form of whiteness. (6)

The subtext of the conversation between Jack and Garrett concerns the idea that it is the white settler who is able to live off the land, while undermining other ways of being. Within the

‘founding forgetting,’ indigeneity is dispossessed through the gentle guise of violent erasure. Like Faina, Native people appear as references into the narrative and then disappear. When Mabel is looking for an explanation for the child she has seen in the woods, she asks Ester, a local homesteader, about other children: “Out your way here, well, there are a couple of Indian camps up the river, but they’re usually there only in the summer, when the salmon are running. And, of course, there’s not a single blonde among them” (76). The “Indians” referenced here are peripheral, *there*, but just gone.

Another tributary reference to indigeneity appears when Jack is looking for information about Faina’s dead father: “‘Nope. Can’t remember the last time he was in here. But then he only came into town a few times a year. Spent all his spare time drinking with the Indians upriver, from what I heard’” (109). The Indians portrayed may be individuals that exist, but drinking separates them from the prerequisite of authentic indigeneity that makes them “really Indian” (Deloria 91). Again, these Indians are somehow there, even if they are lacking in physical presence or voice. Unlike the first reference, these drinking Indians are only there via hearsay “from what I heard.” The third reference to indigeneity reifies their presence: “Once [Garrett] bought Mabel a beaded moosehide pouch sewn by an Athabascan woman upriver” (195). The final reference to indigeneity reduces the Indian away from place, hearsay, or even artifact: “‘... He’s out these next few nights, siwashing it on his trapline.’ ‘Siwashing?’ ‘Like an Indian. No tent. No creature comforts. He packs light and travels hard” (253). The transformation, or reduction, from peripheral presence to reified object via the traditionally beaded purse, and then to a white settler “siwashing like an Indian” is aligned with Garbutt’s concept of white autochthony:

These tensions, they assert, are part of the process through which settlers come to terms with establishing their lives in new landscapes using imported cultural practices and languages and applying them in often contrary conditions to those in which the practices and languages arose. (7)

When Garrett *siwashes*, it is not a way of life, but something that he can take up and put down at will. He takes up indigenous practices when they are necessary but is equally comfortable putting them away to enjoy “creature comforts” in civilized society (253).

The Indigenous peoples referenced in these four instances are present only through their conspicuous absence and without a voice. Faina, likewise, barely has a voice. She has come into Jack and Mabel’s home many times before they ever hear her speak, and when she does, it is always in a whisper:

The child was silent. Jack reached over her for the salt, apparently giving up on getting a name from her. Mabel waited, but Jack went back to eating.

Faina, the girl whispered.

What’s that, child? Mabel asked.

My name. It’s Faina.

... Each syllable a quiet whisper. (119)

Faina takes a step away from her original silence by softly uttering her own name, but she is barely audible. Ivey has constructed Faina as a manifestation marking indigenous absence in audience imagination; even this feigned representation of indigeneity is treated as a ghost with slight physical presence and a whisper for a voice. Further drawing attention to Faina’s negligible presence, the author refrains from ever presenting her voice in quotation marks. Faina’s substance in the narrative is made weaker by its lack of visual presence on the page.

There is no room for Faina in modernity because she represents indigeneity. Faina is a ghost and her eventual disappearance carries the inevitability of fate. This section of the Snegurochka fairy tale precedes part three of *The Snow Child*:

As she gazed upon him, love ... filled every fiber of her being, and she knew that this was the emotion that she had been warned against by the Spirit of the Wood. Great tears welled up in her eyes — and suddenly she began to melt.

(Snegurochka translated by Lucy Maxym in *The Snow Child* 268)

The prelude to the final section makes no secret of Faina's inevitable disappearance. When Ivey foregrounds the final section with the plot outline, the audience becomes less interested in the question of whether or not she will disappear, only the form disappearance will take.

Where Faina is graceful and at home in the frozen wilderness, she is never comfortable in the confines of Jack and Mabel's cabin. The civilization of cabin life threatens the girl:

It was only when the cabin became overheated, with the woodstove and steam from cooking, when the girl seemed to wilt in her chair, only then did Jack sense some ripple beneath the surface, some doubt or fear in Mabel's desperate happiness. She dashed to the door and brought in a handful of snow. She dabbed it to the girl's cheeks and forehead. There, there. It's much too hot in here. It's much too hot in here. Jack put the back of his hand to the child's forehead, but she was cool to the touch. (216)

Mastery over fire and the ability to heat a home and cook food are hallmarks of progress; but Faina cannot exist comfortably in modernity. Her inability to withstand the heat of civilized life is linked to primitive survival; the threatening presence of heat in civilization highlights the tenuousness of Faina's existence.



Jean M. O'Brien explains a possible reason for this delicate balance in *Firsting and Lasting: Writing Indians Out of Existence in New England*:

[The] penchant for Indian purity as authenticity also found essential expression in the idea of the ancient: non Indians refused to regard culture change as normative for Indian peoples ... Indians could only be ancients, and refusal to behave as such rendered Indians inauthentic in their minds. Indians, then, can never be modern. These ideas provided fertile ground for the idea of extinction. (22)

Jack and Mabel insist upon Faina's purity and protect her fragility by accepting that she must exist, can only exist, outside modernity. Their insistence on her purity takes the form of not recognizing her transition into womanhood. Jack responds with incredulity when Faina becomes the love interest of Garret: "But Faina? It was impossible. No matter her age, she was childlike, pure and fragile. Garret had more decency than to defile that" (317). Faina's authentic Indianness requires purity; for Jack and Mabel, purity rests in her childlike state and inability to withstand heat. They rightly assume that for Faina to be anything but a child in the wilderness will trigger her disappearance because in the American imagination indigeneity and modernity are incongruous. Indeed, modernity is necessarily predicated upon indigenous absence.

Ivey also connects Faina to a more *indigenous* way of life through Faina's symbiotic affinity with animals. Indigeneity, in the American imagination, is often speculatively configured as having a closer relationality to nature. Although she is an adroit hunter, she is also like an animal; that aspect allows the audience to question her humanity. The ambivalent relationship of "simultaneous desire and repulsion" arises in this scene in which Jack tries to keep Faina from disappearing into the woods: "He wondered what he could do. Physically hold the child, force her to stay against her will? She would fight like a trapped polecat. She would hit and scream,

maybe even bite and scratch, of that he had no doubt, and he would be left feeling a beast himself” (Deloria 3 and Ivey 217). Faina, the girl who calls the wilderness her home and lives “like an animal,” threatens order: “Euro-Americans had imprisoned themselves in the logical mind and the social order, Indians represented instinct and freedom” (Ivey 234 and Deloria 3). Faina’s inherent contradictions project ambivalence; she is an animal and depends upon animals to survive. She is both bound by instinct and freed by her connection to the primitive.

There is a separation between wilderness and civilization, between order and chaos, in *The Snow Child* and each threatens to invade the other. Faina is threatened by the heat and order of civilization, and Jack fears that her presence will bring out savagery in himself. The two romantic storylines within the narrative between Jack and Mabel and Garrett and Faina underscore the wilderness/civilization binary; however, the separation can fluidly apply to physical spaces and social relationships.

Between Jack and Mabel the metaphor of a map signifies the firm placement of their relationship in the social order: “Beneath the covers, they fumbled with each other’s bodies ... tender lines like the creases in an old map that has been folded and refolded over the years” (46). The image of a map is in stark contrast with Garrett and Faina: “He knew he could lose himself in the place where her blonde hair met her soft skin. He could lose himself in her pale smoothness ... There, along her delicate rib cage ... there, against her beating heart ... there, he was lost” (313-4). When Garrett ventures toward Faina romantically, the idea of lostness is repeated, which is opposed to the map that exists between Jack and Mabel. Whereas Jack and Mabel’s relationship represents civilization, the “lost[ness]” that exists between Garrett and Faina underscores Faina’s conflation with wilderness.

The map that exists between Mabel and Jack highlights Mabel's crucial contribution to the settler colonial process, which as a theoretical framework tends to focus on masculine roles when analyzing gender. Laurel Clark Shire explores the complicit part white women historically played in settler colonialism in her book, *The Threshold of Manifest Destiny: Gender and National Expansion in Florida*. Shire challenges the inclination to romanticize white women in the frontier setting as pioneers. Shire argues that settler colonialism "depended on the domestic and reproductive power that American culture granted white women to make permanent settlements and to camouflage colonial violence" (12). Shire analyzes early American ideology regarding the role of domesticity that white women brought to the wilderness:

Catharine Beecher opined in her 1842 *Treatise on Domestic Economy*, one of American women's most significant roles was to bring Christian domesticity to the wilderness, to install 'an ark of civilization amid an ocean of foliage.' As Beecher and other adherents to such domestic ideology noted, as the nation expanded, virtuous and well-ordered households (created and sustained by white women) would ensure that new territories and states would become civilized places that supported republican democracy. This belief countered the anxiety that pioneers would 'go native' when they encountered 'uncivilized' places and societies, or that the peoples that an expanding America swallowed up would challenge American political and social order rather than assimilating into it. (14)

Mabel acts as the bulwark for civilization against the challenge that Faina presents. The map Mabel signifies protects Jack against the instability that encroaching wilderness introduces, while also giving their homesteading efforts permanency. When Faina dies, but her child remains in Mabel's care, assimilation neutralizes the threat that Faina presents for "American political and

social order.” Mabel’s role in the home and creation of family life ensures that American ideology could bolster the acquisition of territory gained through agricultural settler colonialism.

The vulnerability that both Jack and Garrett experience in Faina’s presence exists, in part, because wilderness is a powerful opposition to agriculture based settler colonialism; “Wherever the work stopped, the wilderness was there, older, fiercer, stronger than any man could ever hope to be. The spindly black spruce were so dense in places you couldn’t squeeze an arm between them, and every living thing seemed barbed and hostile” (61). Jack exhibits the same level of susceptibility when he ventures into the wilderness as Faina does when she comes into modernity. In the beginning of the novel before Jack and Mabel have established a relationship with Faina, Jack, upon seeing her, chases her extensively through the woods. As he does so, he enters wilderness, which introduces rational instability:

Jack had always considered himself if not brave, then at least competent and sure. He was wary of true danger, of flighty horses that could break your back and farm tools that could sever limbs, but he had always scoffed at the superstitious and mystical. Alone in the depths of the wilderness, however, in the fading winter light, he had discovered in himself an animal like fear ... Disturbing thoughts whirled through his brain, stories he must have heard as a boy about forest hags and men who turned into bears ... What did he expect to find? ... nothing at all, no child, no tracks, no door, only insanity bared in the untouched snow? (91-3)

The same fear of becoming animalistic that occurs when Faina is in his home presents itself when Jack ventures into the wilderness; he is disturbed by thoughts of “men who turned into bears.” The fear of wilderness expresses Jack’s fear that he will not be able to create order in the

untamed plot of wilderness he is homesteading. The settler colonial identity is constructed by virtue of its power over and apart from nature; however, the irrational descent Jack experiences is threatening because it brings him too close to nature. The wilderness encroaches upon him as Faina enters their home; he cannot escape it when he leaves to follow after her. This dichotomy between wilderness and civilization must be resolved because the idea that true Americanism is embedded in the wilderness influences the heart of identity construction within the settler colonial fantasy.

Aldo Leopold, the influential thinker and conservationist to whom modern day wildlife management and the United States wilderness system is attributed, elaborated upon this idea in his 1925 article “Wilderness as a Form of Land Use”:

There is little question that many of the attributes most distinctive of America and Americans are the impress of the wilderness and the life that accompanied it ... These, if anything, are the indigenous part of our Americanism, the qualities that set it apart as a new rather than an imitative contribution to civilization. (401)

According to Leopold, wilderness and nature are the vehicle that allow Americans to construct identity that is “apart” and “a new.” Jack and Mabel’s ability to live “the life that [accompanies]” wilderness will allow them to rise above being just “an imitative contribution to civilization.” Agriculture is the ultimate variable allowing Jack and Mabel to become “a new.” They cannot simply subsist, or exist, in this narrative if they are to gain access to an indigenous belonging. *The Snow Child* narrative seeks to celebrate the autochthonous journey of homesteading in Alaskan history and provide a contemporary Alaskan audience with their own origin or creation story.

In part, the dichotomy between civilization and wilderness can be further understood in terms of the concepts of land as opposed to property. Faina exists upon land, whereas settler colonials exist upon property. Barbara Arneil discusses the early colonial justification for the creation of property in “The Wild Indian’s Venison: Locke’s Theory of Property and English Colonialism in America.” John Locke was an early 18th century philosopher credited with the Labour Theory of Value, one whose influence can be clearly seen in the settler colonial behaviours and attitudes exhibited within *The Snow Child*. Arneil writes:

Locke's chapter on property introduces acquisition of the earth's products (fruit and beasts) as the first form of private ownership. His argument, like those of Winthrop, Cushman and Strachey, is that Amerindians and Englishmen alike have the right, through their labour, to appropriate the products of the soil. Locke then turns to the chief matter of property, namely land. The labour which begins property in land is of a particular form, namely agrarian cultivation and enclosure. In essence, waste land is the property of those who cultivate it, rather than those who occupy, hunt on, live on or mine it. (9)

The Labor Theory of Value allows for the acquisition of territory by those who labour upon it; when someone labours upon something they vest themselves in the land and the land becomes property because it is a *part* of the labourer. Locke’s theory situates settler colonialism and indigeneity on common ground, but requires a particular form of labour, mainly agriculture, as a means to gaining ownership. This placement on equal footing reconfigures the potential argument that indigenous land loss is victim to settler colonialism. The responsibility to acquire land through cultivation is available to both indigenous peoples and settlers alike, and Locke posits agricultural acquisition of property as *justified* means. Importantly, Locke’s theory of

labour draws on a Christian influence. This emphasis on God vests the discussion of land and property as a divine matter:

God commands us to cultivate the soil, but he argues that natural right, through labour, actually gives the 'industrious and rational' title: God gave the World to Men in Common; but ... it cannot be supposed he meant it should always remain common and uncultivated. He gave it to the use of the Industrious and Rational, (and Labour was to be his Title to it). (4-5)

In part, Jack and Mabel earn their land through suffering. The legal act of homesteading is superficial in comparison to the physical struggle of surviving on the land and the divine title that labour can bestow. There is a transition from land to property through the physical act of working that can be best seen when Jack wants to will the land to Garrett: "These are legal papers that make you partner in this farm ... You know we don't have a son of our own to leave this place to" (276). When Garrett questions his decision, Mable echoes Jack's sentiment:

'It is true, what Jack said. We wouldn't be here, this farm wouldn't be here, if it weren't for you and all your hard work. We don't have much in this world, but we want to offer you what little we do have.'

'Are you sure? I mean, isn't there someone else, somebody from your family?'

Garrett slid the papers back toward Jack.

'Nope. You're the closest we've got,' Jack said.

'I was never expecting anything like this.'

'We know. But it's the right thing to do.' (276-7)

The natural law at work for labour based land acquisition is highlighted when Jack says, "[I]t's the right thing to do." The emphasis clearly places the transference of land between Jack and

Garrett in a moral context, and Locke's influence on settler colonialism situates the question of land ownership as divine.

The statement that Garrett is the only one they could hand the farm to forgets Faina, whom Jack and Mabel clearly see as a daughter. The transaction between Jack and Garrett reinforces the Labor Theory of Value structure that has been used to replace indigenous people for centuries and upon which settler colonialism, in part, relies. Garrett works the land alongside Jack and Mabel; therefore, in theory, it is he that deserves to own the land. Also, when the characters forget Faina's potential claim to the land, they can look past other indigenous claims to the land. In fact, Faina's claim to the land should be viewed as absurd and implausible because she is a child and a ghost. There is so much anxiety over her inevitable disappearance that the idea that Jack and Mabel would transfer something as permanent as land ownership becomes impossible to imagine. Even if the audience believes generally that Jack and Mabel should will the land to their daughter Faina, they can be comforted through the knowledge that Faina does not have agricultural aspirations. However, Garrett has also professed disrespect for the idea of farming and would also prefer to live a life of trapping and subsistence hunting, yet Jack and Mabel insist that he inherit the farm (152).

Similarly, Garrett does not recognize the possibility for Faina to *own* land; in this exchange the difference between land and property is even more stark. Faina, who represents absent and vanishing indigeneity, exists upon land, whereas Jack, Mabel, Garrett, and other settler colonial characters, exist upon property. After first seeing Faina on the mountain killing a swan and then subsequently at Jack and Mabel's house, Garrett tracks her into the mountains, under the pretense of hunting wolverine:



Everything about the girl filled him with guilt. He had shot her fox and told no one. He had spied on her. Again and again his mind returned to the scene, to the girl's struggle with the swan. The emotions it sparked bothered him, but he could not leave it be. As he pursued her he told himself he was only going where he wanted — toward the mountains, toward the wolverine ... Garrett paused, hands on his knees, to look at the trail. Bare traces on top of the snow, like a lynx or snowshoe hare ... Irritated fascination twisted in his gut. (288)

Garrett follows Faina as a hunter, and through his examination of her tracks, she becomes the prey. This treatment of Faina as prey further distances her from the ability to have access to land as property. She is under the jurisdiction of nature, and as a ghost, nature decrees that she is on her way out. When he finally finds her, she questions his presence and he responds that he is looking for wolverine. Faina then removes a dead wolverine from her pack and tosses it to Garrett.

What's this? he asked.

A wolverine.

I can see that. What are you doing with it?

I'm giving it to you. So you can leave.

Garrett was speechless for a moment.

I don't want it, he said crossly. Not like this.

I'll skin it for you, said the girl, and she turned again to the pack.

What? Hell, that's not what I mean. Why should you give it to me?

I don't want it. You do.

Why'd you kill it, if you didn't want it? (290)

This final question by Garrett completely ignores the admission that he does not want the wolverine either. When he assumes that Faina does not want the wolverine, because she killed it for different reasons than he would have, Garrett also subtly articulates the justification for settler colonialism under Locke's theory. If indigenous people are not using agriculture or enclosure on land, then the land is *terra nullius*, or nobody's land. Settler colonialism does not recognize other articulations of land use, or land that does not function as property. This confusion can be seen when Garrett does not understand Faina's justifications for killing the wolverine and vice versa when Faina does not understand why Garrett will not take the wolverine that he tells her he desires. His resistance to the wolverine can be better understood as a preference for property via labour under Locke's theory and a resistance to *land* in common. Garrett does not want the wolverine; he is after the earning, and right, to the wolverine gained by the natural or divine law of merit. It is not the wolverine he desires, but the ownership of the animal that can only come through his ability to track and kill it himself.

Garrett and Faina speak a different language regarding the abstract idea of ownership. The audience can see the miscommunication taking place in the discussion about the wolverine, but the same tension between land and property arises as Garrett leaves:

He had always been respectful of other trappers' territories. A bachelor not much older than Garrett had claimed the land downstream from Jack and Mabel's, and he did not trespass there. He hadn't trapped Boyd's trails, even when he saw that the old man's pole sets went untouched, until Boyd bestowed the line upon him. A man could be shot for stealing a trapper's catch, and even edging on his territory was considered disrespectful. But this? This was just a girl, a girl snaring a few rabbits. Never mind this wolverine. That had been a fluke, surely. But he

knew it was no such thing — wolverine weren't caught on a fluke, and he had watched her kill the swan. She was capable. (291)

Garrett is consciously making an exception for Faina. Land, in the settler colonial fantasy, must be obtained through merit obtained via labour and then can be bequeathed, as can be seen in the example of Jack and Mabel's willing their homestead to Garrett and also when Boyd passes his traplines to Garrett. Garrett admits that Faina is "capable" and therefore he should respect her "territory," yet he cannot, because she has been animalized and indigenized in his mind. Therefore, she can only assimilate into the social order or be erased.

"Desire and repulsion" are also expressed in Garrett's relationship with Faina (Deloria 3). The first time he lays eyes on her she is killing a swan. He hides behind a hillock of snow and attempts to remain out of sight. The violent and erotic language of this scene gives the audience a sense of his confusion:

Then he wondered — would she kill it? The possibility sickened him, and he didn't know why. Because the girl was willowy, with delicate features and small hands? ... The girl collapsed beside the bird, its dead wings stretched broad. The blood spread brightly beneath them and the snow fell. She didn't move for some time. Garrett's legs were stiff from the cold, and he felt the need to stand, but mesmerized, could not. (281)

The violent defeat of this swan confuses Garrett; he is drawing connections between the swan and "willowy ... delicate features and small hands" of Faina even as he watches her kill it. The swan *submits*, its blood spreading brightly between them, as its warm body lies beneath her. Ivey then chooses to have Faina stitch the feathers of this particular swan into her wedding dress in her eventual marriage to Garrett: "white feathers, stitched along the neckline of the dress. They

lay flat against the fabric so that they seemed part of the raw silk, a mere variation in the texture” (352). The feathered dress is a source of fascination for Garrett: “Again and again Garrett let his hands touch the small of Faina’s back where the feathers lay flat against the silk, and he knew they had come from the swan” (356).

The connection to the swan also foreshadows her own mortal end. After years of tangibly existing only to Jack and Mabel, the scene in which Garrett watches her kill the swan signifies her violent emergence as a physical presence to other people in the community. Faina is conflated with the swan and just like the swan, her departure from the world is preceded by a plethora of blood:

Garrett wasn’t prepared for the screaming. Faina’s voice had always been clear and serene, like a glacial pond, but now it was ripped from her throat in a beastly, tortured growl ... Just then Ester pushed aside the curtain, and Garrett could only stare at the blood covering his mother’s hands and arms all the way up to the elbows, like she’d been butchering a moose ... Garrett caught a glimpse of her legs, her bare feet in the air, and blood, everywhere blood. (361)

Faina spends her life butchering animals, but is also portrayed as living in symbiotic harmony with them; she is also symbolically butchered by her thrust into modernity. She cannot become domestic, but the child Faina bears will take his place in the logical order while also solidifying the kinship between Faina’s autochthonous link to Alaska, and Jack and Mabel. The child survives and *is*, unlike Faina, a child that can be held and possessed.

Faina’s deterioration also signifies the transfer of wilderness power to Jack and Mabel. Faina has been used as a metaphor to understand wildness and wilderness throughout *The Snow*

*Child*. When Faina surrenders her supernatural power for mortal love, Jack and Mabel can finally thrive because wilderness, through Faina, has lost its power:

Faina was walking across the meadow and toward the trees, but she struggled in the snow and stopped frequently to rest ... She didn't spring into the spruce trees like she had so many times before... then she turned back toward the cabin, toward her son and her home, and followed her own deep trail back through the snow. (366)

When Faina sacrifices her home in the wilderness to “her son and her home” in the cabin, she completes the transaction of autochthony; she disappears, and Jack and Mabel are linked through kinship to the land. Their kinship to her connects them to the land even as her fated disappearance carves space for them. Through the process of autochthony in the narrative Jack's relationship to the land fundamentally changes. Initially, Jack cannot “enjoy his solitude in these woods but instead [is] self-conscious and alert, fearing most of all his own [ineptitude]” (60). But through kinship with Faina he “walk[s] the fields alone, and his step was lighter. Often he would scoop some of the soil in his hand and run his thumb over it, marvelling at its richness” (194). Once the wilderness is symbolically conquered through successful agriculture, the bridge between wilderness and civilization built upon Faina renders her unnecessary.

Faina has appeared throughout the story as a “snowy apparition,” “some sort of spirit,” and “a wild sprite,” and vanishes without a trace (Ivey 212, 219, 236). She is treated by Ivey and understood by Jack and Mabel as supernatural:

He had said too much, but not as much as he could have. He hadn't told Mabel about the snow devils, or about how Faina had scattered a snowfall like ashes on her father's grave. He didn't tell her how, as she stood over the grave, snow

fluttered against the child's skin as if she were made of cold glass. The flakes did not melt on her cheeks. They did not dampen her eyelashes. They rested there like snow on ice until they were stirred away by a breeze. (238).

These examples Jack contemplates are clearly magical. When Bergland writes about the portrayals of indigenous people as supernatural specters, he draws attention to the rhetorical power of ghosting; "The ghosting of Indians is a technique for removal. By writing about Indians as ghosts, white writers effectively remove them from American lands, and place them, instead, within the American imagination" (4). Treating Faina as a ghost calls attention to her as a figure of transition. As a ghost, she is only tenuously here, simultaneously absent and present, which makes her vanishing feel natural. She has been removed to the realm of the imagination; when her ghost is put to rest, she is also erased from the landscape, which creates the space needed for Jack and Mabel to belong and to settle the land.

Like a ghost Faina does not leave the mortal life with any trace, despite the blood present when she births her son. She becomes ill from a blood infection and asks Mabel to bring her outside because she is so hot. Mabel sits outside with her as the peace of the night and the cold lulls her to sleep until she is awoken abruptly:

'Where is she?' There was no anger in his voice, only desperation ... Among the caribou hides, Mabel saw the wedding quilt buried in snow. How could she be so negligent? She picked it up to shake the snow and caught sight of blue wool ... Faina's blue coat, embroidered with snowflakes. Her scarf. Her mittens. Her moccasins ... There, still buttoned inside the coat, was Faina's white nightgown ... 'But Jack ... I don't understand.' 'Don't you?' 'She's gone?' 'He nodded.' 'But where?' (374-5)

This type of vanishing cues the final step in the process toward white autochthony: “The mantle of autochthony has been passed from Aborigines to themselves. As ‘the ancient autochthon passes away’ ... ‘the settler takes his place as the new (and superior) indigene’” (Garbutt 6). In the end of her life Jack becomes Faina’s father just in time to give her away to Garrett. The child springing from this union is a grandchild to Jack and Mabel, solidifying their bond beyond her death.

*The Snow Child* is a myth of “founding forgetting”; Faina has arisen in the “transformation of the imaginary of the colonist/ settler in terms of cultural and spatial identity ... [occurring] in the tension arising between exile and belonging, past and future ... [representing] the colonists break with the motherland through ‘birth’ in a new land” (Garbutt 6-7). Faina is the indigenous ancient, whose survival requires a cleaving from modernity. The kinship created between Faina and the settler protagonists adopt her into their family in order to become a substitute ancestor linking them autochthonously to the land. Faina’s disappearance, and the indigeneity she represents, creates space for the settler fantasy to be authentic.

## Chapter 2

### The Precipice of Extinction: A Settler Colonial Pathway to Indigeneity

I realized that my friends and students were dying because they grew up as their parents and grandparents had, immersed in a constant struggle for survival. The substance abuse, the suicides, and the violence were symptoms of an indigenous culture battling to maintain cultural identity in the face of a new and often oppressive and soul-consuming way of living ... Why didn't we learn about the destruction and disease brought by the Russians, the whalers, the gold miners, or the missionaries? (Rearden, 276-9)

Don Rearden's author's note for the post-apocalyptic novel *The Raven's Gift* (2011) is fraught with anxiety over the futurity of Yup'ik culture. *The Raven's Gift* is broken into three sections, each preceded by an excerpt from the early American naturalist Edward Nelson's recording for the Smithsonian Institution (276). The first two epigraphs speak of early speculation on mammoth bones and presumably dinosaur bones, and the third epigraph originates from a Yup'ik creation story. Taken together, the three epigraphs — the first two on extinction and the third on creation — aptly frame and guide the rest of the story, which follows two narrative threads erratically through time. The characters and Alaskan Native Peoples in Rearden's narrative are on the precipice of extinction, and the space between presence and absence of the Alaskan Native peoples in the story becomes, unwittingly, the ideal conditions for a settler colonial fantasy of belonging.

I turn to Patrick Wolfe's careful discussion in, "Settler Colonialism and the Elimination of the Native," to understand further the way Rearden's narrative can be seen as complicit in the *process* of settler colonialism. Wolfe discusses the critical difference between a genocidal event as opposed to the continuing process of settler colonialism:

On the one hand, settler society required the practical elimination of the natives in order to establish itself on their territory. On the symbolic level, however, settler



society subsequently sought to recuperate indigeneity in order to express its difference—and, accordingly, its independence— from the mother country.

...elimination refers to more than the summary liquidation of Indigenous people, though it includes that. In its positive aspect, the logic of elimination marks a return whereby the native repressed continues to structure settler-colonial society.

It is both as complex social formation and as continuity through time that I term settler colonization a structure rather than an event... (389-390)

The protagonist of *The Raven's Gift* is John, the central character for both threads. His journey from settler in the beginning of the narrative to indigenous belonging in the end navigates the relationship between “elimination” and the “complex social formation” of settler colonial identity. The narrative both eliminates the indigenous population of Alaska while using indigenous ancestry to assert independence and to lay a foundation for belonging that includes the white settler colonial.

The audience is first introduced to John, and his Yup'ik companion, a blind girl in a plastic toboggan. They are travelling on foot from Nunacuak, a small fictional village near Bethel, Alaska, that has been decimated by a mysterious disease. John and the blind girl are the only two remaining in the village that have not either been killed by disease, left at an earlier time, or been turned into “outcasts,” supernatural monsters that have turned to cannibalism (18). Eventually, they travel as far as Kuigpak, where they find an untouched elementary school building filled with food, the bodies of dead adults and, mysteriously, no children. Only two people have survived the outbreak there: an old woman named Maggie, who joins them, and the blind girl's uncle, who we later find out has been banished from Nunacuak for sexually assaulting the girl when she was a child. John, the blind girl, and Maggie leave Kuigpak with a

sled full of food and head toward Bethel, only to find that conditions are worse there. The whole village has been ransacked and the only survivor is Red, a self-professed “standard survival nut” who has locked himself within a solar powered bunker (205). The narrative involves a smattering of other characters, but the story remains closely centered around John’s experience.

Skirting the edges of the narrative in the aftermath of the mysterious disease is an ominous skier, who is ostensibly there to collect the blood of the survivors and then kill them (256). The skier chases the characters through the novel, while shifting blame for the catastrophe to an unknowable, presumably western outsider. John and the Yup’ik girl have theorized that Alaskan Native people have been quarantined and have become the expendables in a worldwide experiment with the bird flu. The skier, conspicuously wearing all white is reminiscent of the cold stark color of a lab coat, comes to represent, nebulously, science and modernity in the minds of the characters.

John, the blind girl, and Maggie continue to travel, although they are not sure where to go or what they will find. John recommends heading south to seek help, but the blind girl hopes to find her cousins and the other missing children from the elementary school they previously found filled with dead adults. They take refuge with Red for a short period of time before striking a deal with him and leaving. Red allows them to take a snowmachine and supplies on condition that John returns to kill him after bringing the blind girl a distance away. Red believes himself unable to commit suicide and does not want to live alone any longer. However, when John returns, he finds Red has been shot by the skier, who has also stolen Red’s other snow machine and has begun searching for John and his companions. That night as the trio camps, John wakes to find that the blind girl has disappeared into a snowstorm, naked and shoeless. He chases after her, leaving Maggie behind with all of their belongings and supplies. He finds the blind girl

under a caribou skin next to a vast caribou migration. John and the blind girl have their first sexual encounter beneath the caribou skin and the narrative slips into magical realism, as John and the blind girl turn into ravens and then revert to their human form. The next morning they awake to one of John's former students, Alex, who will take them to the group of missing children hidden in an abandoned gold mine. The old woman, Maggie, has killed herself and torched their belongings, effectively erasing their existence from the attention of the skier.

The second thread includes the story of John and his wife, Anna, prior to the mysterious disease. They have moved north to take jobs as first year school teachers in the bush from an "urban sprawl" in the continental United States (7). John and Anna's thread opens on their job interview, during which the audience discovers that John thinks he may have an Alaskan Native grandmother:

"I saw you marked 'other' on the application, but I'm not supposed to ask about those things, of course. You're Alaska Native?" he asked.

John shrugged. "I don't know, that's why I just check 'other.' My father was a product of the war, I think. My grandfather was stationed somewhere up here during the Japanese occupation of the Aleutians. He stayed for a while afterwards ... I never met my grandmother." (8)

John's grandfather's temporary deployment to Alaska provides the only evidence that he might have Alaskan Native ancestry, yet the suspicion has driven his and Anna's quest to Alaska. He is described as looking ethnically caucasian and is initially cautious and uncomfortable about claiming to be Alaska Native: "He stood up and turned his butt toward her. 'Besides, no Eskimo has an ass this white'" (15). As Anna questions the drastic move they have made, John reiterates his desire to "figure out if a quarter of me belongs here" (64). The two have difficulty

transitioning to their life in Nunacuak, experiencing culture shock and cabin fever as they attempt to reconcile their fantasy of Alaska with their everyday experiences. John fits more comfortably into his role of teacher than Anna does, and as the novel wears on, he becomes much surer of his previously only speculated upon Alaskan Native ancestry:

“Why do you care about this stuff?” Jack asked. “This just a trick to get us to like school?”

“Good question, Jack. That’s critical thinking, my man. Question everything. Even question why someone like me is trying to teach you something. The truth? Well, I want to learn about this stuff too,” John said.

“Why do you care?” Alex asked.

“I guess because my grandmother was Alaska Native,” John said. (128)

John’s transition from speculation about his Alaskan Native ancestry to a confident claim of his indigeneity is a theme that resonates between both narrative threads. The audience continues to learn more about John and Anna’s relationship through a series of flashbacks; eventually, she succumbs to the mysterious disease only moments after she reveals that she is pregnant with their first child. Before she passes, Anna makes John promise that he will “love again,” which he eventually fulfills through his relationship to the blind girl (268).

Within the context of *The Raven’s Gift*, the audience accepts John’s Native ancestry, which then has the ability to guard him from being marked as a settler. Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang explore a set of tropes, in “Decolonization is Not a Metaphor,” that describes settler “‘*moves to innocence*’ which problematically attempt to reconcile settler guilt and complicity” (3). They define settler colonialism as “different from other forms of colonialism in that settlers come with the intention of making a new home on the land” (5). One form of a settler move to

innocence is settler nativism, in which “settler identity is avoided by the deflection of native ancestry allowing the set of settler colonial behaviors to benefit the exempt persons” (11). Settler nativism “is about imagining an Indian past and a settler future; in contrast, tribal sovereignty has provided for an Indigenous present” (13). Despite the possible Native ancestry of the protagonist, and the author’s familiarity with Yup’ik peoples, the story participates in the settler colonial process by placing indigenous people on the precipice of extinction and does not allow space for a sovereign indigenous presence.

The indigenous people portrayed cannot cope with modernity and eventually disappear; the land becomes *terra nullius*. Modern technology, infrastructure, and modernizing indigenous people are effectively wiped out by the mysterious disease. The disease, ultimately, avoids active dispossession in the settler colonial quest for land because it situates the Native peoples as already gone. The remaining group of indigenous children are left under the stewardship of John, a man who ultimately succeeds in a settler fantasy narrative. The pseudo-adoption of the remaining Indigenous children by John can be further understood by Tuck and Wayne’s exploration of settler adoption fantasies:

[W]e locate the desire to *become without becoming [Indian]* within settler adoption fantasies. These fantasies can mean the adoption of Indigenous practices and knowledge, but more, refer to those narratives in the settler colonial imagination in which the Native (understanding that he is becoming extinct) hands over his land, his claim to the land, his very Indian-ness to the settler for safe-keeping. This is a fantasy that is invested in a settler futurity and dependent on the foreclosure of an Indigenous futurity. (14)

John comes as a settler and remains as a Native, but the narrative sidesteps addressing colonial history by hitting reset. Throughout the narrative, Rearden calls attention to Alaska's colonial history. The main character John, as a teacher, specifically discusses the celebration of colonial catastrophe through the carefully constructed version of history that is taught in schools:

‘You’re right that Columbus sucked. He—well, let’s just say he wasn’t the kindest, most friendly explorer. Maybe we could say that what he was part of is more horrible than you could ever imagine. What if I told you that this first hero you learned about in history wasn’t who you have been taught he was at all? What if I told you that most of what you have learned and will be expected to learn’ — he paused and held up their history book — ‘was a bunch of BS?’ (110)

John, in his role as teacher, guides the students to question Alaska's history of contact by asking his students: “‘Well, what do you know?’ ... ‘What do you know about your own history?’” (128). Calling attention to colonial catastrophe and providing the scapegoat of Western modernity, via the “white skier,” is a shuffling away from complicity. Rearden provides the audience these red herrings, but *The Raven's Gift* ultimately furthers the settler colonial process by participating in a settler-move-to-innocence narrative.

*The Raven's Gift* has a disjointed chronological order and frequently jumps between narrative threads. The structure highlights the connection between the blind girl and John's wife Anna, a parallel representing the struggle between John as settler and John as indigenous. This instance creates an inevitable comparison made between the blind girl and Anna because of the similarity in situations when the storyline transitions:

He tried not to think of what Anna would say about shooting cranes. You might as well have shot an albatross, he imagined her saying in disgust.

John and the girl ate the last of the hare, and he'd kept the bones in case they would need to break them open and boil them for the marrow. (142)

Anna shows qualms over a subsistence lifestyle that the blind girl does not, and the juxtaposition of these two scenes portrays John's development. He no longer worries about how Anna, or the society of his previous existence, would view his actions now.

John's claims to indigeneity are tied to his supposed Alaskan Native grandmother. There are several, almost flippant, references to John's blood status throughout the narrative: "Come on. Are you worried about your new students? They're going to love you, John. Who doesn't love John Morgan? They have to love at least a quarter of you" (95). Rearden's superficial treatment of blood quantum does not significantly explore the complicated relationship of blood politics and modern indigeneity. Chadwick Allen discusses the complexity of blood politics in *Blood Narrative: Indigenous Identity in American Indian and Maori Literary and Activist Texts*:

... standards of blood quantum represent a fundamental attack on the sovereignty of American Indian nations. Federal degree of blood criteria prevent Indian nations from determining their own criteria for tribal membership. In the works of many Indian writers produced during the contemporary American Indian renaissance, the issue of blood quantum or degree of Indian blood is a site of perpetual conflict, opening on their pages as painful wounds that are inextricably personal — "Are you a real Indian?" — and political — "How much Indian blood do you have?" (177)

In Rearden's narrative, the issue of blood politics is sidestepped because the land becomes *terra nullius*. John does not have to grapple with the ramifications of his speculated upon Alaska Native ancestry because he becomes fully indigenized by virtue of the disappearance of other

forms of indigeneity. In the beginning of his journey to Alaska, he feels uncomfortable claiming to be Alaska Native:

He glanced around at the elders, short, thin old men he'd never seen up close before. Wrinkles covered their faces with dark lines and endless crevices, contour maps of history, weather, hunting. He wanted to tell them he wasn't just another outsider but that his grandmother had been Native, maybe even Yup'ik. He wanted to question them. Listen to them. Hear their stories. And apologize all at once. Instead, he sat there. Dumb. (209)

John still senses himself an outsider despite his Native grandmother, while simultaneously feeling driven to apologize. By the end of the narrative no males remain that are more Native than he is. The questions of "Are you really Indian?" and "How much Indian blood do you have?" are raised, but Rearden does not attempt to address the tension (Allen 179). John feels compelled to claim that his grandmother is "maybe even Yup'ik," but I will note that the Alaska Native peoples that John's grandfather would most likely have been in contact with during World War II, given his location in the Aleutians, would be Aleut, not Yup'ik (Veltre and Smith 495).

John's Alaskan Native grandmother and the erasure of male indigeneity in *The Raven's Gift* can be more fully understood through Vine Deloria's "Indian-grandmother complex." Deloria describes that during his time as an Executive Director of the National Congress of American Indians many white people he met claimed to be of Indian descent, always through their grandmother's side. In *Custer Died For Your Sins: An Indian Manifesto*, Deloria writes:

It doesn't take much insight into racial attitudes to understand the real meaning of the Indian-grandmother complex that plagues certain whites. A male ancestor has



too much of the aura of the savage warrior, the unknown primitive, the instinctive animal, to make a respectable member of the family tree. (3)

Deloria also speculates on the need for Indian ancestry through the Indian grandmother:

Is it because they are afraid of being classed as foreigners? Do they need some blood tie with the frontier and its dangers in order to experience what it means to be an American? Or is it an attempt to avoid facing the guilt they bear for the treatment of the Indian? (4)

Deloria's conjectures about the Indian-grandmother complex are clearly present in Rearden's novel. Imbedded within John's discomfort around the village elders is fear of being classed as a foreigner, a desire to experience America's last frontier, and a nagging sense of guilt for the colonial aftermath that he views as "symptoms of an indigenous culture battling to maintain cultural identity in the face of a new and often oppressive and soul-consuming way of living," which John can now see up close (276).

The stark gender divide within *The Raven's Gift* also mirrors Deloria's speculation on racial attitudes regarding "the savage warrior, the unknown primitive, the instinctive animal" (3). Throughout the dystopian aftermath of the disease John and the blind girl encounter many outcasts, and they are all male. In one instance, as John and the blind girl travel upriver, they come across a group smoking human body parts in a makeshift camp. John examines the men after shooting them:

When he was finished, he rolled the men onto their backs. He wanted to remember their faces. He wanted to know what sort of men would become worse than animals. Soot and grime covered their foreheads and cheeks. The first two

men were Yup'ik, the third a white man, his mouth opened and in a half snarl, his teeth rotten to sharp points. (200)

With the exception of John, Red, and the blind girl's uncle, all remaining males are either dead or have been transformed into supernatural cannibals. Notably, even though the blind girl's uncle has been spared the effects of the disease, he is still portrayed as a figurative social outcast. The blind girl describes the distinctive smell: "'This man smells like him, though—like one of them, but like my uncle, too,' she said. 'The outcasts smell different ... Wrong. Like a flower that's rotting'" (18). Because Red is eventually killed, John remains the only adult male at the end of the narrative that is not outcasted, making him a *de facto* insider despite his prior uncertainty about his origins.

In contrast to the outcasted indigenous males in *The Raven's Gift*, the female characters are the gatekeepers of authentic indigeneity. There are two indigenous female characters in the narrative: Maggie and the blind girl. Presumably, because no female outcasts are depicted, the blind girl and Maggie are the last indigenous Alaskan women alive: "[Red] pulled a nearly empty bottle of gin out from behind some pots. He poured a finger's worth into two small glasses and handed John one. 'To the last of the real people,' he said, gesturing to the women on the bed" (203). Maggie and the blind girl both sacrifice for John's sake; Maggie gives her life while the blind girl has forsaken everything she knows.

Philip Young, in, "The Mother of Us All; Pocahontas Reconsidered," discusses aspects of Pocahontas mythology that are profoundly lingering which provides further insight into the indigenous women in *The Raven's Gift*:

We see Pocahontas at the moment of womanhood, coming voluntarily from the assembly to the altar, where she pledges the sacrifice of her own integrity for the

giving of life. This is an offering up of innocence to experience, a thing that is always—in our recognition of its necessity—oddly moving. It is an act which bespeaks total renunciation, the giving up of home, land, faith, self, and perhaps even life, that life may go on. (25)

The blind girl, like Pocahontas, is ready to forsake everything to help John:

‘Sometimes,’ she said, ‘I think I’m just here to help you get to where you think you need to go. Maybe even I wish that’s why I’m here. When we’re walking and not talking I think about what’s left in my life and it’s just all empty. I feel empty, you know? Hollow like a drum. My heart’s a drum, a tundra drum that pounds and there’s no one to listen, no one to dance. I have no one. Nothing. I can’t even see all that I’ve lost. I’ve lost everything. My family. All my cousins. The village. If I’m here to help you get somewhere, then there’s at least a reason for this.’  
(143)

The blind girl, like Pocahontas, is on the precipice of womanhood. Her transition through the narrative from the childlike opening image of a helpless blind girl sitting in an “orange plastic toboggan” to a sexually mature partner for John is unnervingly subtle (5). In fact, she is only referred to by her title as “the girl” for the first two thirds of the narrative, which affirms audience expectations of her inexperience and age. When John, Maggie, and the girl eventually reach Bethel and introduce themselves to Red, John realizes, with the audience, that “the girl” has a name: “‘John Morgan. This is — ’ he said, and stopped, stunned. After everything, he didn’t even know the girl’s name ... ‘I’m Rayna’ the girl said” (195). The audience, alongside John, have accepted the girl’s sacrifices for John without questioning her namelessness. And, yet, it is through Rayna’s body that life “may go on” (Young 25).

Rayna Green builds on Young's work with Pocahontas in her article "The Pocahontas Perplex: The Image of Indian Women in American Culture." Green scrutinizes how Pocahontas imagery appears in American culture and the way it is often juxtaposed by "the Princess' darker twin, the Squaw" (711). The Indian Princess is there to "save or give aid to white men" at the expense of her own people and identity; and unlike the Squaw, "her sexuality can be hinted at but never fully realized" (703 and 711). The Indian Princess "promises much, [but] she remains aloof," whereas conversely with the Squaw archetype "the presence of overt and realized sexuality converts the image from positive to negative" (710-11).

Green points out that the most troubling aspect of the dual stereotypes for Indian women is that they are both "tied to definition by relationships with white men" and that the Indian Princess and Squaw are "between a rock and a hard place. Like that of her male counterpart, her image is freighted with such ambivalence that she has little room to move ... but she is especially burdened by the narrowness of that definition" (713). Rearden panders to prevailing stereotypes of Indian Princess and Squaw imagery with Rayna's character and other indigenous women in the narrative. Rayna has been sexually assaulted, but Rearden, self consciously, and unnecessarily, puts her in conversation with John in such a way that affirms her virginal state:

'I almost tried it. Seems like everyone I knew had humped before. They would go out at night right before the village curfew and do it in empty steam baths, in those covered porches, or even under the school. Sometimes if everyone was at open gym or at bingo games, the boys would try make me go to their house. I thought maybe if I let someone be with me they would maybe want to be my boyfriend. My cousin told me I would find someone to love me that way. I was

too scared, though ... So,' she continued, 'if you don't count what my uncle did, I'm still one, I guess. A virgin.' (210-11)

Green articulates that the Squaw's "physical removal or destruction can be understood as necessary to the progress of civilization even though her abstracted sister, the Princess, stands for that very civilization" (714). Rearden avoids explicitly stating that promiscuity makes indigenous women disposable; however, within the narrative, none of Rayna's promiscuous indigenous sisters survives. Civilization only has hope for progression through the sexually pure Rayna. She wears a white band on her right ring finger, a traditional symbol of patriarchal enforced sexual purity in western culture (217). Because Rearden moves within the limits of prevailing stereotypes for Indian women, which have been articulated by western culture, sexual purity is an intersection that fluidly crosses between expectations for Indian and white women. A substitution takes place: John was a settler and now he is indigenous; Rayna is indigenous, yet she conforms to the western ideal for womanhood.

Rayna's existence in the first two thirds of the narrative as nameless further marginalizes her character to the role of stereotype. She serves to give aid to John, and through her he is recognized as indigenous. Rayna is gifted with supernatural vision because of her blindness: "'Trust her eyes,' [Maggie] told him. 'She sees more than me and you ever will'" (132). Through Rayna's mystical abilities, John becomes recognizably indigenous despite the settler behaviors he exhibits. Rayna describes a vision that she has had before meeting John:

I saw a different world. Not our village, but maybe an old village ... the people were all dressed in our old clothing. Some of them had parkas and fur leggings, and some of them were almost naked and dirty with soot from the seal oil lamps ... the people were mostly dead or half-dead ... *kass'aqs*, they were getting out of

a long wooden boat and coming up the riverbanks carrying torches and crosses.

White crosses. And one man, he had only caribou-skin pants, he was fighting with them ... The Native man I saw was you. (77)

In this vision Rayna clearly recognizes John as Native. She has also set up a combative divide between Native and whiteness; not only has John been recognized as Native, but he is in conflict with whiteness on behalf of Natives. He is an able-bodied protector singled out to fight for a dying people.

Rearden also uses the guiding structure of epigraphs that frame the narrative to set Rayna up as the feminine gatekeeper to indigeneity. The third and only section of *The Raven's Gift*, in which "the girl" is named is preceded by a Yup'ik creation story:

"You will be very lonely by yourself," said Raven. "I will make you a companion." He then went to a spot some distance from where he had made many animals and looking now and then at Man, made an image very much like him. Then he fastened a lot of fine water grass on the back of the head for hair... waved his wings over it as before and a beautiful young woman arose and stood beside Man. (Yup'ik Creation Story, Recorded by Edward Nelson in 1899, 201)

John and Rayna have scant material possessions throughout their journey, but Rayna carries with her a bundle of grass that she continually weaves into a mysterious object. Rayna, like the woman created for Man in the story, has been linked to "fine water grass" throughout *The Raven's Gift*. The linguistic association of Rayna and Raven alongside her connection to her bundle of grass leads the audience to conclude that she is the gift of the Raven for Man described within the Yup'ik origin story.

Similar to the woman created by the Raven in the Yup'ik creation story there is a connection between the grass and Rayna's hair: "[John] looked at her braids and then at the girl's grass creation. The braids were similar, three strands that tapered to two and then one, and he wondered how the girl could weave the strands so perfectly without seeing" (248). In the final scene the audience realizes that she has woven a Yup'ik marriage mat: "She lifted one hand from the cool earth and pressed it against her breast and the other on the grass mat she'd woven ... I made this for us ... He imagined the two of them melting together, the grass mat weaving itself into their skin" (270-1). John and Rayna's partnership mimics the creation story, and the novel strengthens the connection when immediately after their sexual encounter one of John's former students, Alex, finds them. He will take them to the missing group of children harbored inside a nearby abandoned mine, and John and Rayna will presumably take stewardship over them.

John asks Rayna and Alex about Maggie's last words to him: "'*Piuraa?* I'll see you,' Alex said. 'We say that and not goodbye. We don't say goodbye ... 'Maybe she meant she'll see you, and you naked ones will bring her spirit back with a baby, ah?'" (273). The children that appear right after John and Rayna's sexual encounter are symbolically the product of their partnership, and Rayna's familial relationship to the children allows John to become the *de facto* father.

When he first arrives in Nunacuak, John wants to be viewed as related to the people around him and the imagined familial connections are somewhat ambiguous: "He imagined the family of four, perhaps somehow related to him, sitting on the benches inside the skiff, headed toward the village he would soon be calling home, too" (49). Alexander Hirsch, in his dissertation, *Enlarging the Democratic Possible: Struggle, Self-Determination and Survivance in North American Indigenous Cultural Politics*, writes about the desire to form familial bonds

between settler and indigenous: “An imagined kinship between Native Americans and European settlers denoted colonial conquest as territorial inheritance rather than violent dispossession” (57). Hirsch uses a speech delivered by Thomas Jefferson to the Osage in 1804 to “[illustrate] the complexity of the place the Native holds for an emergent American national identity” (57). Within the speech by Jefferson there are imagined kinships ranging from “children,” “neighbors,” “friends,” “fathers,” and “all of one family” (57). Hirsch argues:

Jefferson’s use of mixed kindred metaphors suggests his own struggle to locate the settler and the settled in a common, if confused, matrix of familial relation. The incestuous bond he intimates (settlers are at once “fathers” and “brothers” to the settled indigenous populations) implies Jefferson, though sure of their chiasmic relation, is himself unsure of how this kindred alliance is figured. What is certain is that the knot that ties those relations is tightened by the shared autochthony Jefferson describes. Colonists and aborigines alike have “grown out of this land,” and thus share in a common ethnoscape. (58)

Jefferson attempts to create familial kinships with the Osage; and likewise, when John becomes *de facto* father to the found children, he establishes kinship with them in such a way that gives himself access to their autochthonous connection to the land. Just as he establishes this confused familial relationship with them, the land is simultaneously cleared of indigeneity in a way that allows the future to be shaped by the pseudo-indigene John. The surviving children of indigenous mothers and fathers are set to be raised by a father triumphant in the settler fantasy narrative.

The union between Rayna and John echo, again, the Pocahontas mythology that has been formative to American identity. Young discusses the astonishing number of Virginians that now



claim our county's most famous Indian grandmother for their ancestor: “[Pocahontas’] son Thomas grew up in England, and then came back to this country to start the line of proud Virginians — of Jeffersons and Lees, of Randolphs, Marshalls, and an estimated two million other people who to this day trace their ancestry back to the Indian girl” (394). The famed union between Pocahontas and John Rolfe is yet another iteration of even earlier perceptions of the gendered relationship between indigenous peoples and settler colonizers. Joane Nagel explores what she has termed *ethnosexual frontiers*, in her book *Race, Ethnicity, and Sexuality: Intimate Intersections, Forbidden Frontiers*. Too often, settler colonial theory focuses on race without closely examining the way that gender functions as a mechanism of racial relations within settler colonial processes. Nagel examines “an early-seventeenth-century drawing by Theodor Galle, based on a sixteenth-century work by Jan van der Street, entitled ‘America’” (64). The scene illuminates an early view of America from the perspective of colonizers:

... a standing Vespucci who is clothed and surrounded by the paraphernalia of technology, with the uncivilized America — a reclining woman who is naked and surrounded by wild animals and cannibals. Vespucci is the modern, masculine scientifically inquisitive traveler, America is the primitive, feminine new world, open to discovery and exploration. (65)

I am struck by the similarities between this image from four hundred years ago and the closing imagery of *The Raven's Gift*. The narrative closes upon Rayna, inexplicably naked in a snowstorm, sexually available, surrounded by caribou and cannibals.

Although John and the blind girl experience extreme hunger, they never succumb to cannibalism, a practice that separates them from the outcasts. Their hunger strengthens John's

connection to an indigenous past. Before the disease John has a conversation with a Yup'ik elder in a grocery store about past famines in Alaska:

Long time ago we had no food. Me, I was just barely old enough to walk, but I remember my stomach burning real bad. I remember we only had old dry berries and salmon with mould on it. The elders said it was punishment, that we were starving because we left the old ways behind. (57)

Tuck and Wang argue: "Pain is the token for oppression, claims to pain then equate to claims of being an innocent non-oppressor" (16). John's hunger pains are the tokens of oppression that he has missed. He has grown up with all the privilege of being recognized as a white male, and some pain is needed in order for him to become Native and thus take on an identity that assumes generations of oppression. In the Author's Note to *The Raven's Gift*, Rearden mentions that the storyline was born from ruminating upon times of famine that occurred in Alaskan Native history (277). John metaphorically takes on Alaskan Native historical suffering through the starving time he survives.

In the beginning of *The Raven's Gift*, the Alaska that John and Anna arrive to suffers from an inability to cope with modernity. By the end of the narrative all but John, Rayna, and a small band of children have become extinct. Tuck and Wang observe the following:

Everything within a settler colonial society strains to destroy or assimilate the Native in order to disappear them from the land - this is how a society can have multiple simultaneous and conflicting messages about Indigenous peoples, such as all Indians are dead, located in faraway reservations, that contemporary Indigenous people are less indigenous than prior generations, and that all Americans are a "little bit Indian." (9)

The audience can see these conflicting messages about indigenous peoples on display throughout *The Raven's Gift*. The book simultaneously ends with the idea that all indigenous people are dead and the ones that are not are far away in a fictional non-space. The modern indigenous peoples have been stripped of their right to exist, while those who are left must revert to the primitive for survival. John's ability to come as a settler and become recognized as indigenous because of his claimed Native Grandmother is complicit in the settler colonial process because it both eliminates Native peoples and assimilates the remainder into the complex social formation of settler colonial identity.

When John arrives to Nunacuak, he faces a village struggling with impacts of modern life on traditional culture and practices. The tension between past and present reiterated by the elder in the grocery store recalls starving times as punishment for "leaving the old ways behind" (57). When Rearden's narrative brings in a mysterious disease that wipes out the Alaskan Native population, leaving behind a small group of characters who survive by reverting to the old ways, he provides tacit permission for the audience to dismiss modern incarnations of indigeneity as somehow less indigenous. *The Raven's Gift* affirms the inability for true indigeneity and modernity to coexist. This dismissal weakens the ability for modern Alaskan Native peoples to define indigeneity for themselves, and John's capacity to become indigenous allows the audience to see their own potential as Americans to become Indian. Rearden's anxiety over the futurity of Yup'ik culture has run amuck; by looking to the settler catastrophe of the past for answers he has, tragically, called forth the spectre of disease and decimation which further enforces the perceived irreconcilability between indigeneity and modernity.

## Conclusion

Throughout this exploration of settler colonial fantasies in *The Snow Child* and *The Raven's Gift*, I have tended to favor Mikdashi's avoidance of strict definitions in preference for descriptions and questions. I have noticed that although there are methods by which settler colonialism processes are enacted, both texts fluidly implement and adapt these methods with individuality. Tuck and Wang posit that as a society strains to eliminate the native in order to create *terra nullius*, multiple simultaneous and conflicting messages about indigenous peoples appear. These messages are not in competition with one another; in fact, I have noticed that they work to flood the narrative with many possibilities, such that addressing colonial dispossession directly can be avoided. By sussing out descriptions, as opposed to adhering to a strict definition for settler colonialism, these books have become fertile for comparison and their differences have created rich opportunities for insight into understanding the settler colonial fantasy in Alaska.

In comparing these works three themes have stood out as the epicenters of connection. The first is that the main pursuit for the settler colonial is not just to move to a new place and stay, but to achieve belonging. The struggle for belonging in each text presents itself in completely different ways, but the desire for belonging is the driving force behind the settler colonial journey in both *The Snow Child* and *The Raven's Gift*. Each narrative begins by portraying settler colonial protagonist that have come to Alaska from the continental United States and feel distinctly uncomfortable in their new surroundings. Each set of characters leaves their previous home because they feel exiled; Jack and Mabel because of their inability to have children, and John and Anna because of the crowded urban sprawl. The settler colonial journey in each case begins with protagonists that are desperately seeking to belong somewhere. Whereas the desire to belong drives both narratives forward, each reaches the resolution of settler colonial belonging through divergent paths. *The Snow Child* enacts belonging through the creation of a

substitute indigenous ancestor and the formation of property through agriculture. The land is portrayed as only containing the ghost of indigeneity and Jack and Mabel establish themselves by creating a flourishing farm in the heart of hostile wilderness. On the other hand, John establishes authentic belonging through the process of becoming indigenous himself. Both paths are predicated upon the erasure of indigeneity, and both somehow incorporate eliminated indigeneity to bolster the formation of settler colonial identity. Where *The Snow Child* eliminates and then replaces indigeneity with a new form of agricultural based society, *The Raven's Gift* eliminates and substitutes indigeneity as the settler colonial protagonist becomes indigenous.

The second intersection between texts is the role of adoption as a means to contain eliminated indigeneity such that settler colonial identity can structure itself anew and apart from their previous homeland. In *The Snow Child*, Faina comes to represent absent indigeneity, and through kinship with her Jack and Mabel access autochthony. Faina becomes a daughter to Jack and Mabel before she dies and she leaves her child in their care. The threat that she poses to settler colonial land access, because of her autochthonous birth, is neutralized when her child assimilates into their family; her magical claim to the land transfers vicariously to Jack and Mabel. Likewise, in *The Raven's Gift*, the Alaska Native population is wiped out by the mysterious disease and the few remaining children are left in the care of John, who becomes like a father to them. Strikingly, both texts feature a settler colonial couple unable to conceive. Jack and Mabel stillbirth one child and John and Anna become pregnant, but then she dies before the pregnancy comes to fruition. Through the creation of familial relationships and the adoption of indigenous children, the settler colonials can vicariously access autochthony.

The final and most intriguing intersection is the important role that gender plays; both in the understanding and representation of indigenous peoples, and also the means by which settler

colonials establish themselves and build identity. Although settler colonialism can traditionally be thought of from the perspective of an intrepid male pioneer conquering wilderness in order to establish a home, gender on both the settler colonial and indigenous side manifests itself with much more complexity. In both *The Snow Child* and *The Raven's Gift*, I found that the authors posited authentic indigeneity as ultimately represented by a young indigenous woman whose inevitable purpose is to give aid and become a romantic partner for their white male counterparts. Settler colonials in both texts access indigeneity through feminine gatekeepers. In *The Snow Child*, Faina, a young female, is the only remnant of indigenous presence and the kinship created between her and Jack and Mabel legitimates their presence. John, in *The Raven's Gift*, claims to be descended from a Native grandmother and is eventually recognized through Rayna as indigenous himself. Despite the passive roles that Faina and Rayna are given, both texts emphasize the function of these young indigenous women as central to the settler colonial quest for belonging.

The claim that I would like to argue, with much more extensive examination than this limited study will allow, is that literature has a complicit place in the process of settler colonialism. Both books have participated in what Tuck and Wang refer to as *settler moves to innocence*. The moves to innocence occur as literature sidesteps explicitly portraying colonial dispossession while rhetorically eliminating the Native and using indigeneity to structure settler colonial identity. *The Snow Child* and *The Raven's Gift* both work to bolster the idea that modernity and indigeneity cannot coexist by refusing to recognize normative culture change or modern incarnations of indigeneity, invalidating modern indigenous claims to the land. The narratives inevitably fulfill their quest for belonging by eliminating the indigenous populations,

while also using indigenous ancestry to assert independence and lay a foundation for autochthony that includes the white settler colonial.

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